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Six Resources for Making the Most of Family-Educator Conferences

Tricia Zucker, Michael Mesa, April Crawford, Shauna Spear, and Sonia Cabell

Along with other pre-kindergarten teachers at George Elementary, Ms. Sanchez is spending a semester working with her assistant principal, Ms. Graham, to improve family engagement practices. They review their district's family engagement plan, which is broad and focused on Title I compliance and access to community resources. They realize they need clearer guidance and more concrete materials to move forward. So they review online modules about partnering with families and set individual, initial goals for the upcoming midyear conferences. As she thinks about her own practices, Ms. Sanchez feels that she does a good job relating to families but realizes she is missing a key

component—gathering families' input. She sets a goal to get more of each family's ideas and suggestions instead of dictating everything related to their child's learning process.

Ms. Sanchez and Ms. Graham have a mock family-teacher conference. They role-play how to explain assessment reports in family-friendly ways and how to elicit families' perspectives through different means. Ms. Sanchez and Ms. Graham also preselect possible at-home activities to share with families. After the family-teacher conferences, Ms. Sanchez is excited to tell Ms. Graham that she has met her goals: "I was more prepared and confident with talking points and engaged in two-way conversations with families. Later, two parents even asked for more activities to do at home!"

In early childhood, *family engagement* includes home- and school-based participation of families in their children's learning, with the goal of building genuine and collaborative partnerships between educators and families (NASEM 2016). While the expectation is that family-school collaborations are ongoing and on multiple levels, family-educator conferences hold a particular and important place in this collaboration. During a typical school year, there are at least two opportunities for family-teacher conferences, and 60 to 75 percent of families participate in conferences (Hanson & Pugliese 2020; Merlin 2021).

Family-educator conferences serve a variety of purposes. To maximize the benefits of conferences, educators need opportunities to intentionally prepare and use responsive resources. Such resources position families and teachers to understand each other's perspectives and develop shared goals for learners across home and school contexts. Early childhood educators are key to orchestrating effective family-educator conferences. In this article, we (the authors) present six research-informed resources for making the most of these conferences, with examples of how pre-K teachers received and made use of them. Acknowledging there are diverse family structures and caregivers who may attend conferences, we use the term *family* throughout.

Family-Educator Conferences: Resources in Action

Accumulated research suggests key features of effective family engagement approaches include (e.g., Landry et al. 2021; Bierman & Sheridan 2022)

› trusting relationships between families and educators that value family perspectives
› family-teacher communication that engages families in setting goals for aligned school and home learning
› supports for families to extend learning at home

Teachers typically receive limited training and support around family engagement broadly (Walker & Legg 2018) and strengths-based family-educator communication specifically (Edwards et al. 2019). Teachers may experience language, cultural, emotional, or logistical challenges to communication, including during conferences (Epstein 2016). Most research has not explored specifically how family-educator conferences relate to child outcomes (Castro et al. 2004; Boonk et al. 2018), but there is some evidence that two-way conversations about children's assessment and learning even during "mini-conferences" can be effective (Jones & Gansle 2010; Islam 2019). Indeed, families may face barriers or stressors that make attending an in-person or virtual conference challenging. In these situations, educators can use various alternatives that are personalized to meet the family's needs. For example, phone calls, text messages, conversations at pickup or drop-off, and notes home can start and continue conversations with families.

The resources for making the most of family-educator conferences we describe in this article are available at no cost, and links to all resources mentioned are included in "Multiprong Resources to Engage Families Using Family-Teacher Conferences" on page 56. Many resources come from iterative piloting

work conducted by a team at the Children's Learning Institute that used these resources with 81 teachers and 19 school administrators across four districts in the South-Central United States (Crawford et al. 2020). We also used these resources in randomized controlled trials (Landry et al. 2021; Zucker, Cabell, & Petscher 2021).

Based on data collected from focus groups and surveys, educators and families found the resources useful. For example, nearly all of the administrators and teachers felt that the training positively impacted family engagement efforts. Families mentioned that they liked "having more conferences with the teacher" with opportunities to "share my concerns about my child." Families also said these resources helped them "learn about how my child learns. I discovered he does better when he is playing and having fun."

The resources have been primarily designed and used in public school settings, where other policies and procedures guide family-educator collaboration. While developed and evaluated in this context, the resources may be adapted for other early childhood settings, such as early learning centers or family-based settings. Although we recommend these resources for family-teacher conferences, they can be used in various family engagement spaces (hosting family events, home-school communications), and we invite others to creatively use these resources in ways that best support local priorities.

Prepare with Case Studies

When preparing for family-teacher conferences, educators should evaluate how their family engagement framework aligns with the strengths, interests, and needs of their families and any goals for continuous improvement. This can be done collaboratively among administrators, coaches, and/or educators. Garcia et al. (2016) provide a toolkit for educators to create or refine family engagement plans. Importantly, this includes resources to help educators consider how their own beliefs and assumptions influence their interactions with families.

Within that framework, it is useful for teachers to analyze and discuss case studies that focus on an assets-based perspective of families—especially those from marginalized backgrounds—and the funds of knowledge each family brings to their child's learning and development. Considering realistic scenarios with accompanying discussion of issues of power, prestige, position, and access can help teachers develop their understanding of the social and cultural contexts of different families (Edwards et al. 2019; Goldin et al. 2021). Resources like Edwards and colleagues' scenarios or the Harvard Family Research Project (2013) case studies offer meaningful situations to consider. In addition, coaches or administrators might facilitate discussion of situations that teachers have themselves encountered to analyze and reflect on difficult conversations and emotions that arise. When a common language is not shared by educators and families, an interpreter and/or supporting resource should be planned; avoid using the child as a translator.

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach in which all families are invited to a fixed number of conferences, many schools are using a multiprong or multistep approach, recognizing that some families desire or need more frequent conferences when their child is receiving additional instructional support (McCart et al. 2009; Weingarten et al. 2020). Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) in early childhood are designed to prevent and intervene in learning difficulties with data-informed decisions (Pullen & Kennedy 2018). Each step or tier in this system equates to increased and more individualized levels of support: tier 1 involves universal support, which is given to all students and families, whereas higher tiers include more individualized instruction and resources (tiers 2 and 3). The system is intended to help allocate educators' limited time while addressing the goals and needs of individual children. Note that "Multiprong Resources to Engage Families Using Family-Teacher Conferences" on page 56 indicates whether each resource is most useful for all families (tier 1) or for families seeking or needing more individualized supports (tier 2).

A teacher in one of our projects realized through these preparatory conversations with her administrator that she was "nervous about trying to connect with families without being nosy, intrusive, or offensive." She and the administrator role-played ways to connect without intruding, such as asking families their hopes or goals for their child this year. Another teacher became emotional sharing about a previous experience with a family that made her feel "reluctant and almost scared to reach back out to families." Naming these feelings and walking through challenging scenarios with an administrator helped this teacher to start reaching out to families again and have collaborative conferences.

Gather Family Observations

In their own right, families are experts on their children's development. Conferences should start by eliciting their perspectives on their child's learning and development. One way this can be done is through a Family Observation Form before a conference to help teachers learn about and from families' expertise. The sample pre-K form provides a guiding tool to engage a family member in describing their child's current knowledge and skills. It goes deeper than common approaches focused on children's interests or hobbies by asking families to share information about their child's development across multiple domains. At the conference, families and teachers discuss these observations to identify next steps in learning and supports. Similar resources for ages birth to 4 may use a developmental milestone checklist format.

One teacher explained that the Family Observation Form "reminded [me] that I don't know everything about the child. . . . Parents want to feel like equals, want to feel valued for what they know." This form served as a tool for learning about and from families' knowledge, feedback, and engagement. Having alternative options is important, such as having two-way conversations that use open-ended questioning and active listening by the educator. Teachers enrolled in our projects explained the value of this resource: "By getting parent input, it helps me clarify student development to plan accordingly."

Offer Family-Friendly Assessment Descriptions

Every family should be regularly informed of their child's growth and learning over time. The most common venue for discussing informal and formal assessment data, including screening and progress monitoring, is during family-teacher conferences (Hanson & Pugliese 2020). Communication about child assessment data should be delivered in a timely manner (beginning, middle, and end of year) and in family-friendly ways. Reviewing such data during conferences is important because families may not be able to understand or act on the child's written score report if it is simply sent home without discussion. A conversation should always accompany formal assessment scores, particularly if there is a significant change or if a decision will be made based on the data.

Other effective strategies include describing the skills being assessed, explaining why the assessments are being done, and avoiding educational jargon and acronyms, like IEP (for Individualized Education Program), "scaffolding," or "formative" (Harvard Family Research Project 2013). Families can be provided with a form that defines terms using family-friendly definitions and that is translated into other languages spoken locally. For example, family-friendly descriptions are available for the CIRCLE Progress Monitoring System, a widely used pre-K assessment (Landry et al. 2014). As one teacher said, "[The descriptions] helped show parents what it all means."

Engage in Family and Teacher Goal Setting

Collaborative goal setting during conferences aids in individualizing instruction by setting shared child goals and establishing learning priorities across developmental domains. Yet conversations like these are often dominated by teachers, especially for Spanish-speaking, immigrant, or racially and ethnically marginalized families (Cheatham & Ostrosky 2013). A Family and Teacher Goal-Setting Form or other similar tool can be used to gather families' input about their child's goals. This depends on keeping an open mind about family priorities and acknowledging that these may vary from the teacher's or school's priorities.

Multiprong Resources to Engage Families Using Family-Teacher Conferences

Action	Resources	Most Useful For
1. Reflect on your family engagement plan and discuss **case studies** of real-world family engagement scenarios.	Family engagement frameworks • Toolkit of Resources for Engaging Families and the Community ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?projectID=4509 • Children's Learning Institute Family Engagement Resources public.cliengage.org/tools/quality/family-engagement-resources • Case studies that consider multiple perspectives of educators and families, such as those available from the Harvard Family Research Project archive.globalfrp.org/publications-resources/browse-our-publications/teaching-cases-on-family-involvement	Educators
2. Before conferences, elicit information about the **family's observations** of the child.	• Family Observation Forms public.cliengage.org/training/support/how-to-guides/family-observation-forms • Developmental milestones checklists public.cliengage.org/tools/assessment/infant-toddler-checklists	All families
3. During conferences, explain the child's **assessment data** in family-friendly ways.	• Family-friendly descriptions of assessment purposes ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/Docs/PracticeGuide/dddm_pg_092909.pdf • Family-friendly descriptions of assessment measures public.cliengage.org/training/support/how-to-guides/family-friendly-description-of-assessment-measures	All families
4. During conferences, **set goals** with families to support the child's learning.	• Family & Teacher Goal-Setting Form cliengage.org/clirep/FE/FE_FamilyTeacherGoalSettingForm_English.pdf • Dual capacity-building frameworks www2.ed.gov/documents/family-community/partners-education.pdf	Families seeking or needing more individualized supports
5. After conferences, encourage engaging and playful **family learning activities** at home.	• Online family activity collection https://cliengagefamily.org • Recommended practices ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/southeast/foundations/index.asp	All families
6. After conferences, help families understand how they support their child's learning with **online learning sessions.**	Resources that target specific concerns, such as preventing reading difficulties • readingrockets.org/helping/target Resources that target relevant adult skills • Play and Learning Strategies (PALS) Spotlights video series cliengagefamily.org/english/explore-early-learning/childrens-development-resources • Teaching Together series public.cliengage.org/tools/quality/family-engagement-resources/teaching-together-talking-is-teaching-workshop	Families seeking or needing more individualized supports

Note: All materials available in the CIRCLE Family Activity Collection (cliengagefamily.org) can be found in both English and Spanish.

Goal setting can be completed after discussing a family's observations and other assessment information. This ensures that multiple data sources inform the selected goals to focus on. Teachers should ask families to suggest target skills before teachers provide their recommendations. Together, the teacher and family set goals about how they can each support and challenge the child in these areas. Teachers may refer back to other assessment data to suggest goals while eliciting a family's input in this decision-making process. Goals can be recorded on everyone's copy, along with setting a date to check in on the status of the goals.

Some teachers in our projects cited this goal-setting form as the most valuable resource to their family-engagement efforts. Some believed goal setting helped to guide participation in at-home activities. One teacher noticed this resource changed her conferencing style: "It helped get more buy-in with [the father]; he seemed much more responsive, cooperative. And it helped me to stay focused." Rather than the teacher only discussing what the child could not do, this tool helped the teacher and father move toward collaborative problem solving more than in prior conferences.

Support Play-Based Learning Activities

Although family engagement in learning activities at home is related to children's learning (e.g., Boonk et al. 2018), teachers inconsistently provide families with supports for this after conferencing (Epstein 2016). Rather than sending home worksheets, educators can encourage families to use playful activities and everyday routines to foster learning in content areas like literacy or math. These resources—shared and revisited—can be sent through text messages, emails, or family communication apps (Landry et al. 2021). Teachers reported that sharing ideas for play-based activities "made the parents feel good about themselves because they already do these things in their kitchen or when they are out and about."

The CIRCLE Family Activity Collection outlines research-based activities across multiple domains that can be completed with common household materials. The activities and videos are mobile-friendly (they display well on smartphones), and they have simple instructions in English and Spanish. Many activities include video examples of racially diverse family

members completing the activity with a child. Teachers can suggest activities that align with established goals and/or child assessment data. For example, if targeting early literacy skills, the teacher may suggest the *I Spy Letters* activity, which has children look for letters in the house or while on the go.

Offer Online Family Learning Sessions

Some families seek and benefit from more guidance on how to support their child's learning. In those instances, educators can share online resources, like the series called *Teaching Together* or *Play and Learning Strategies (PALS)* Spotlights. These modules are a lighter touch version of evidence-based family coaching modules used in multiple randomized controlled trials (e.g., Landry et al. 2021; Zucker, Cabell, & Petscher 2021). These mobile-friendly sessions explain evidence-based adult behaviors, such as contingent responsiveness and open-ended questioning, and they feature multiple video examples with real families. The modules (and other similar resources) can be used independently or with a group of other families at events hosted by specialists or educators. Family members can complete knowledge checks to ensure understanding and are encouraged to self-reflect on how to embed these behaviors into their everyday routines and activities.

When families used these short online learning sessions, they reported feeling empowered to support their child's learning (Landry et al. 2021). For example, they said these learning sessions provide "good examples of how to respond [to my child] in different situations" and offered "ideas to involve my child if they don't want to" participate in activities like shared reading. Many families found the extensively tested language support strategies within these sessions helpful (though compare this to Haring-Biel et al. 2020).

Concluding Thoughts

The family-teacher conference can be a unique space for positioning families and teachers as equal partners in supporting children's learning. It offers opportunities for educators and families to make mutual decisions about how to promote children's learning and development across settings. Its potential is realized when educators have effective strategies and

resources for before, during, and after the conference. Across multiple professional development projects, the resources we have presented here influenced the ways educators thought about family engagement and supported genuine partnerships with families, which is illustrated in the closing vignette with another set of pre-K teachers.

> Pre-K teachers at Henderson Elementary have been working to make positive changes to family engagement practices. Based on their work together and with a coach, Ms. Greenberg shifts to providing "on-the-go" family activities that can be incorporated into daily routines. This small shift leads to better uptake by families. Another teacher, Ms. Chambers, starts to reach out personally to each family to share pictures and information about how their child is progressing toward goals, and she receives positive responses from families.

> Ms. Jackson tells a story of a negative interaction with a past family member. Her goal for family-teacher conferences is simply to try to talk with this parent again. She and her coach, Ms. Richards, talk about ways to overcome emotional barriers, what biases Ms. Jackson needs to be aware of, and how she can build a relationship with the parent. Ms. Jackson and Ms. Richards role-play the conference session. Ms. Richards encourages her to offer a variety of methods to connect, which range from an in-person conference to a phone conference because this family likely faces transportation issues. Ms. Jackson arranges a phone conference and uses the strategies for building relationships that she and her coach had role-played. Reflecting on that phone call later, Ms. Jackson says, "It went really well, and now the parent regularly calls just to catch up and check in." The coach notes that while this may seem like a small thing, "it added up [to] a big win for this teacher!"

About the Authors

Tricia Zucker, PhD, is an education researcher and former classroom teacher. She is a professor of pediatrics and codirector of the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston. tricia.zucker@uth.tmc.edu

Michael Mesa, PhD, is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Children's Learning Institute at UTHealth Houston. He received his PhD in educational psychology with a specialization in early childhood education at Florida State University. michael.p.mesa@uth.tmc.edu

April Crawford, PhD, serves as the codirector of the Children's Learning Institute. April has worked on statewide initiatives and research studies focused on policies and practices to strengthen the early childhood workforce and support child development.

Shauna Spear, MA, practiced in school psychology and family engagement for 15 years before joining the Children's Learning Institute at UTHealth Houston. As a senior manager of education outreach, she has led a number of state initiatives.

Sonia Cabell, PhD, is an associate professor of reading education in the School of Teacher Education and the Florida Center for Reading Research at Florida State University. Her research focuses on early literacy instruction. scabell@fcrr.org

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